AFRICAN CUTS

DALTON·SOMARÉ
MILANO

BRAFA
ART FAIR

JUNE 2022

I don't remember the name of the Victorian writer to whom we owe the assertion "there are many doors to enter India, but none to leave it", but I have always thought that it was also appropriate for African Art, as its admirers, collectors and dealers know, captured by the profusion of shapes, the wave of creativity it contains and the disarming naturalness of its complexity.

An extraordinary anarchy of forms that challenges our sensibility and our ability to judge.

Sculptures that have the surprising power of continually renewing themselves, of not being consumed by habit, of keeping the aesthetic pleasure of their proximity alive even after years of frequentation.

The "door" chosen by our Gallery to face this universe, that insists on remaining impervious to the categories of our art history, is, besides its obvious link with the art of the twentieth century, that of searching in it a classicism made of harmony, balance of proportions and aesthetic order, inevitably revisited and crossed by an emotional, psychological and vitalistic contamination.

A traditional and social art far from *l'art pour l'art* and from the contemporary art and its impermanet creative adventure.

In this catalog we have tried, through the cutting of the images and the choice of avoiding colours, to share the eye with which we looked at these works, to underline the forms that struck us and the reasons why we chose them and we decided to introduce them to you.

Leonardo Vigorelli

10

WORKS

MASK

Guro, Ivory Coast

Late 19th century

Wood, pigments

58 cm

PROVENANCE

John J. Klejman, New York

Martin and Faith-Dorian Wright Collection, New York

(acquired from the above on January 5, 1971)

Lance Entwistle, Paris

Private Collection, Paris

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This spectacular mask stands out from the corpus of the others Guro masks with superimposing female figures for the extraordinary accuracy of carvings and for the mastery of its composition.

In its architecture, an intense and modest female face is dominated by a figure bursting youth and beauty.

The lower part even in its extreme expressivity appears subaltern to the solid and sensual form of the figure which proudly flaunts her femininity.

Among the few known survived examples of this type of mask, the present one must be regarded as one of the finest, a true work of art in which naturalism sublimates into symbolic power.

According to the informants of Lorenz Homberger, who studied the Guro masks and their performances on the field, the female masks with two horns and a figure on the top who holds them, belongs to the category of *zuhu* masks.

This type of mask had its origin in the northern part of the Guro region and was carved in rather heavy wood, often partially stained black with cavities painted white, red and blue.

It seems proved that the *zuhu* masks were inspired by similar masks found among the neighbor Senufo, Youre and Baule people.

The figure on the top should represent the *do* woman, the main character of the *do* performances.

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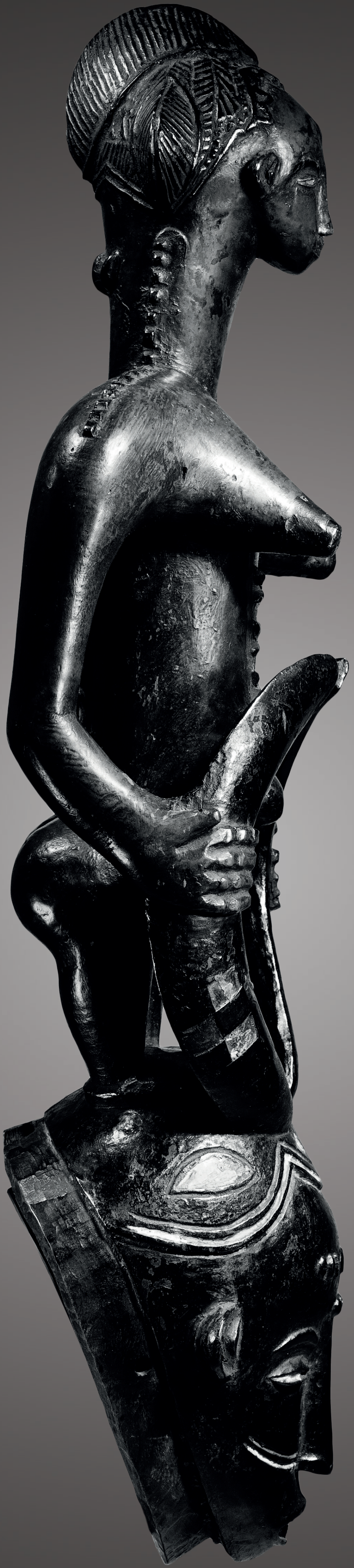

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KNEELING FIGURE

Dogon, Mali

18th century

Wood

22,2 cm

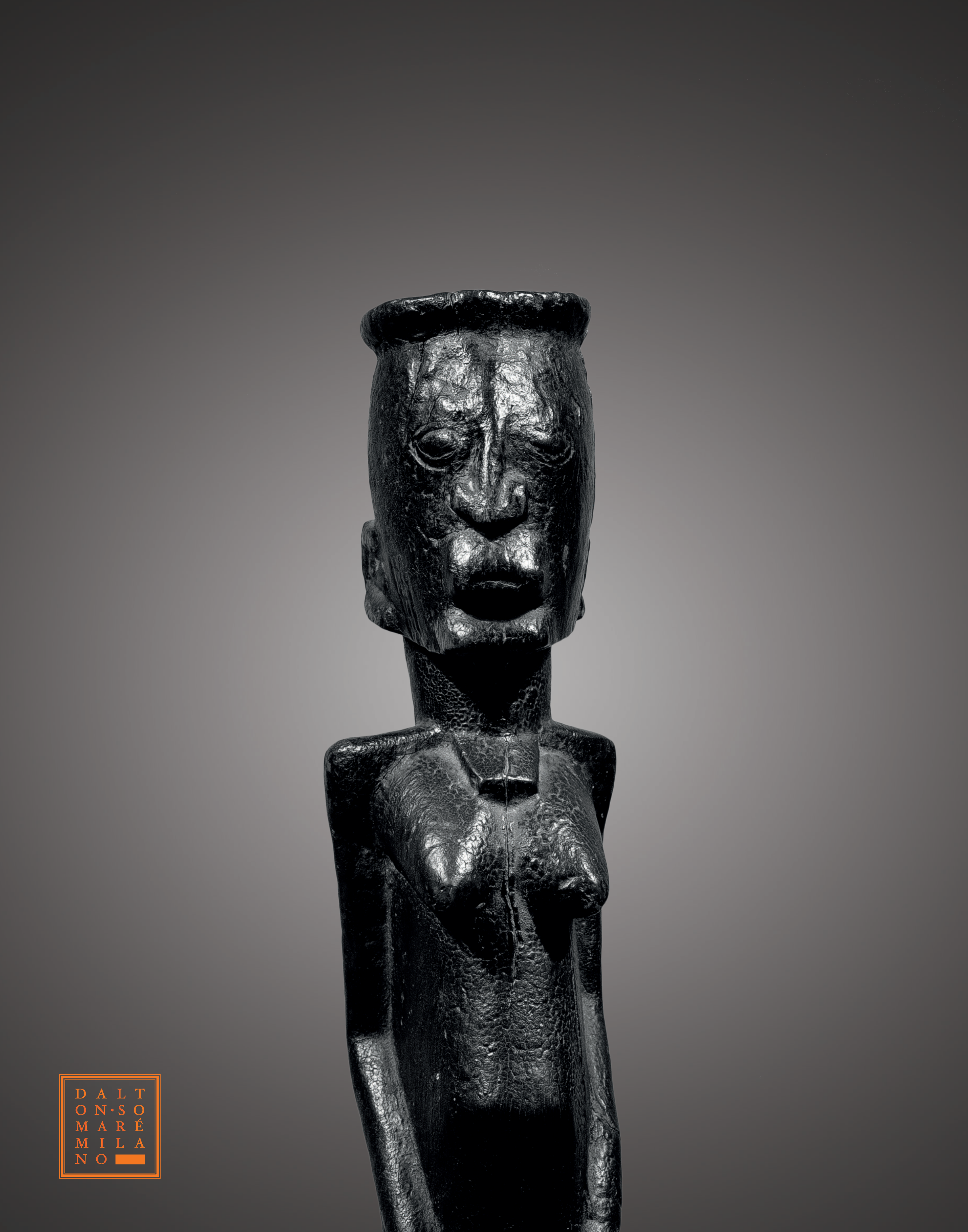
PROVENANCE

Lester Wundermann Collection, New York

Private Collection, Bruxelles

Pace Primitive, New York

Private Collection, Bruxelles



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The theme of the Kneeling Woman, one of the preferred by the Dogon sculptors, is masterly expressed by this statuette.

The figure, seated in an attitude of respect and deference, is animated by the nervous rhythm of the lines of the arms and legs.

The intentional artistic research of a geometric harmony is proved by the feet, which are elongated to enhance and make the kneeling position lighter and elegant.

The curve of the neck, even if the head is perfectly frontal, suggests the intention of a bow, an underlying movement that perfectly suits the meaning of this statuette.

A smooth black and shiny patina, due to generations of offerings, and thicker on the front (a proof that the figure was for a long time on a family altar) concurs to place this sculpture among the Dogon's relevant works of art.

The kneeling position, with the hands resting on the knees, is the one that Dogon women traditionally take as a sign of condolence and to express gratitude towards the deceased. This position was accompanied by a commemorative song that said "thank you for yesterday and for your life, you were beautiful as a statue"

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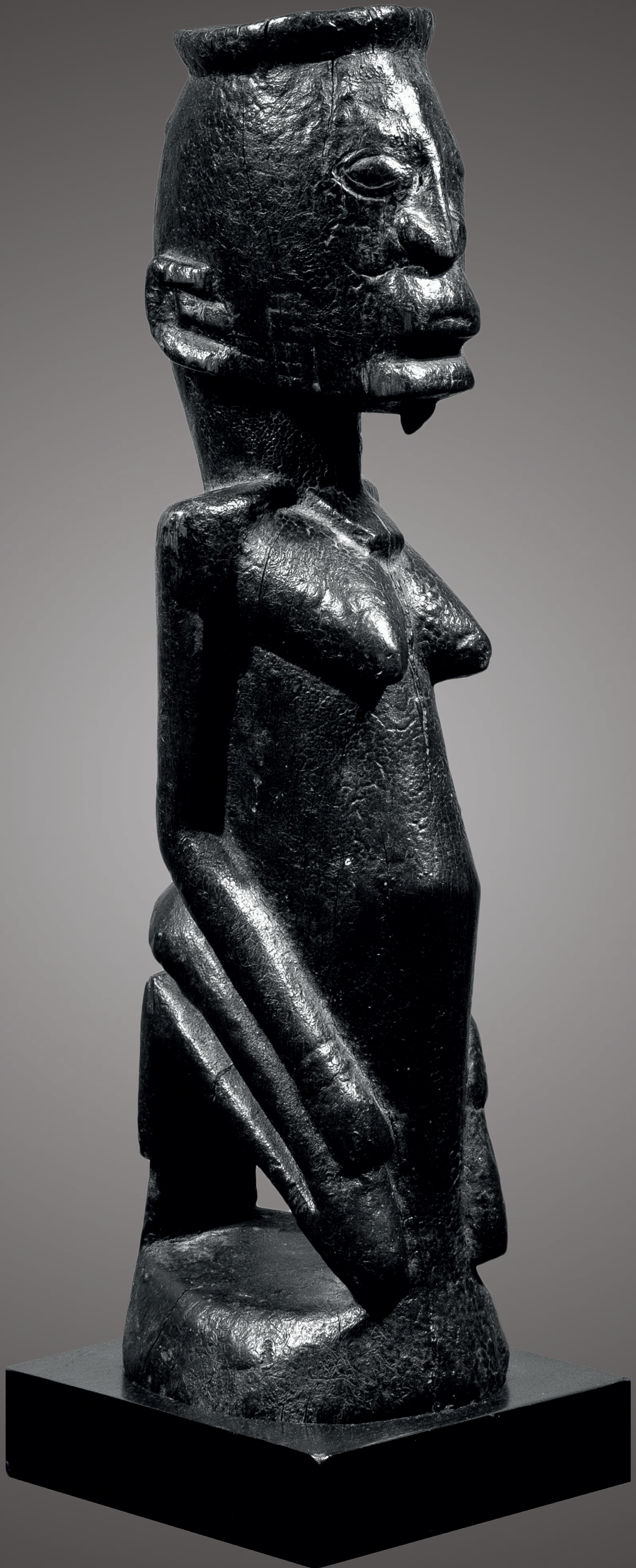
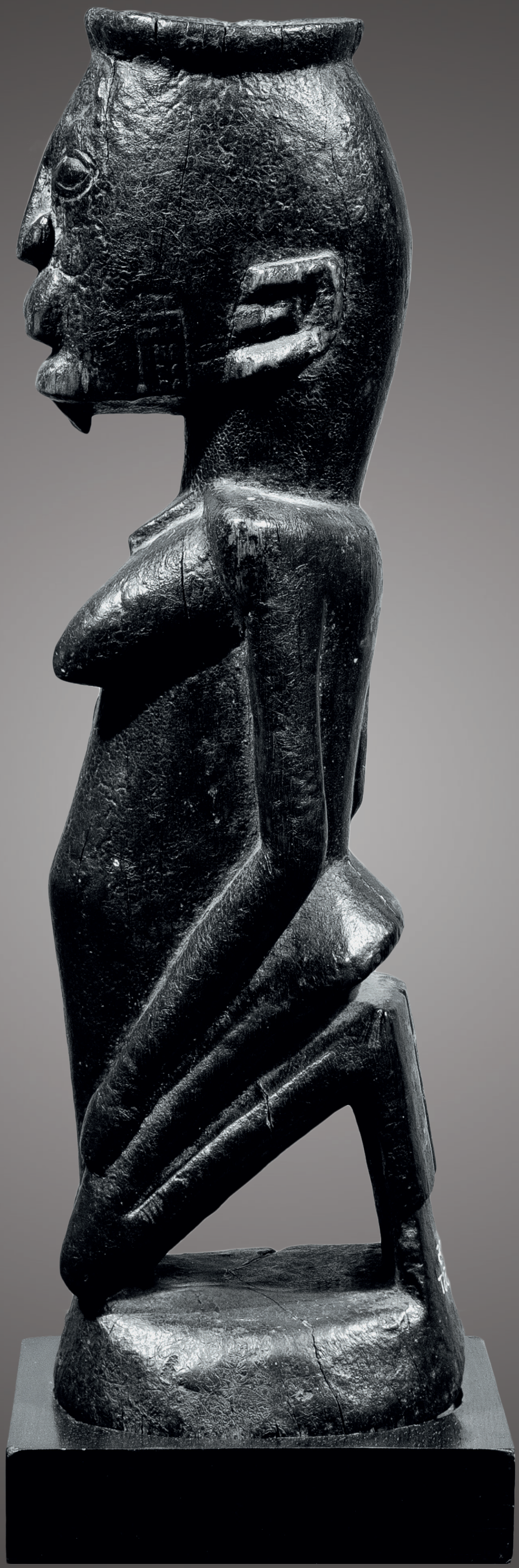


DALTON·SOMARÉ MILANO



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MALE FIGURE

Mbala, Congo D.R.

Late 19th century

Wood

41,9 cm

PROVENANCE

John J. Klejman, New York

David Roth, Connecticut, 1974

Al Ross, New York

Michael Oliver, New York

James Willis, San Francisco

Marc and Ruth Franklin Collection, San Francisco, 1980

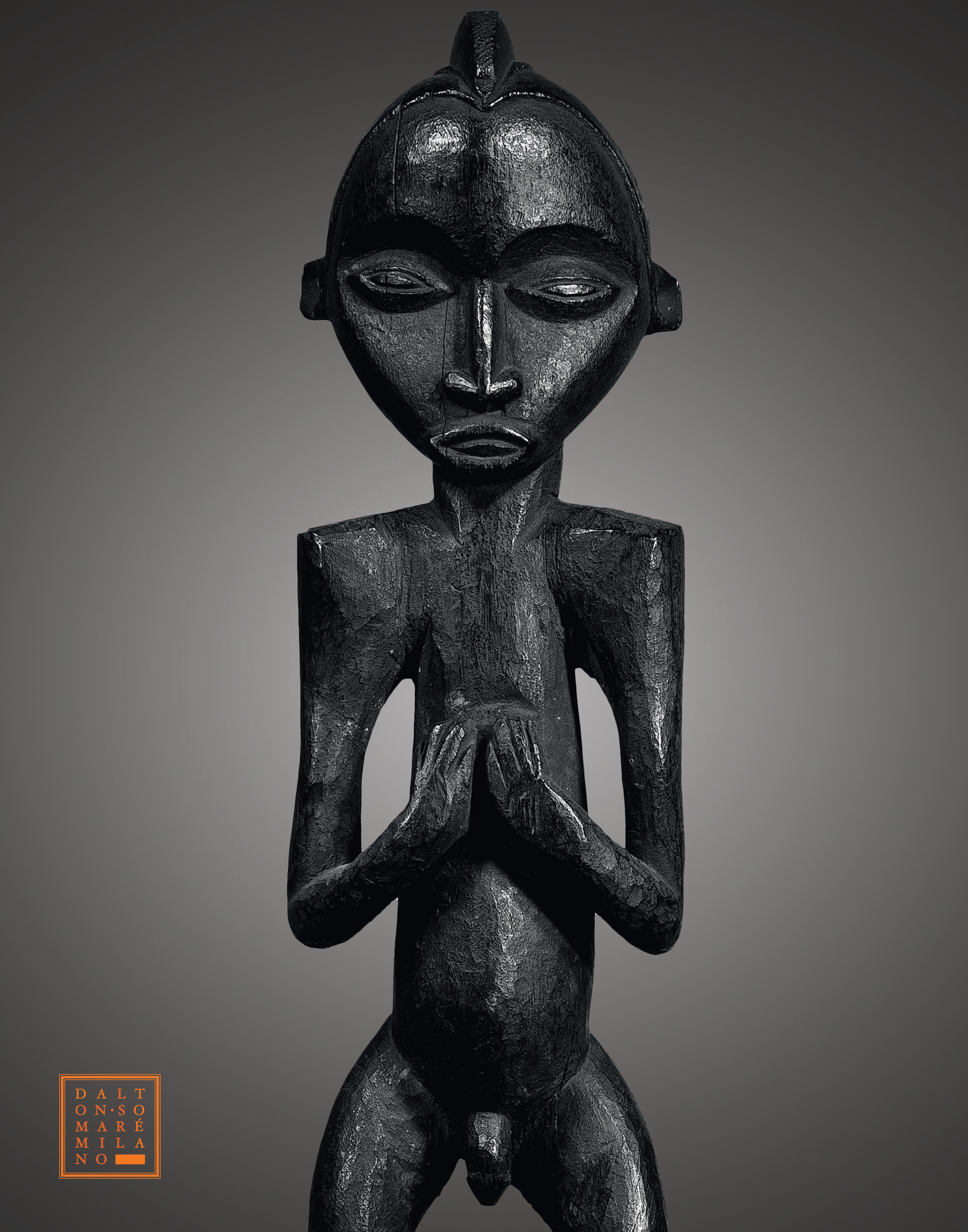
Philippe Ratton, Paris

Private Collection, Paris

PUBLICATIONS

African Art in American Private Collection, Survey W. M. Robbins and N. I. Nooter, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989

Forms and Forces: Dynemics of African Figurative Sculpture, K. Berrin and T. Seligmann, Fine Arts Museum San Francisco, 1998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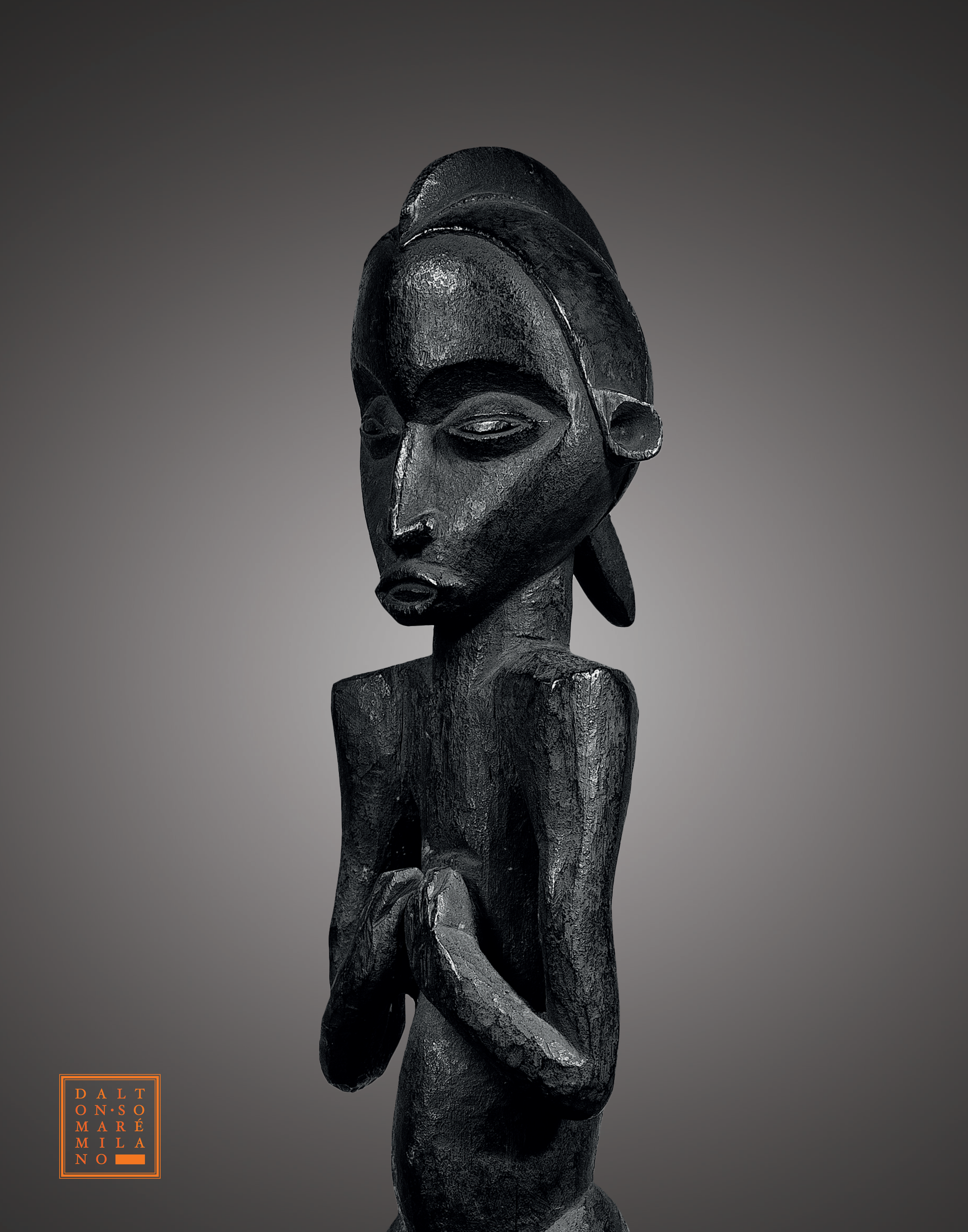
This rare statuette of exceptional graphism represents a male figure in an attitude that can be read as an act of donation or a gesture of respect.

The little information accessible on these kinds of figures in the original context agrees with considering them objects of prestige or emblems of status.

The architecture of the figure which is built along a central axis is designed to guide the gaze towards the large head and face.

The curves that delimit the hairstyle enhance the large rounded forehead and the heart shape that surrounds the facial features highlights the fixity and authority of the gaze.

The half-open mouth is the only dynamic element of the strongly static and frontal expression.



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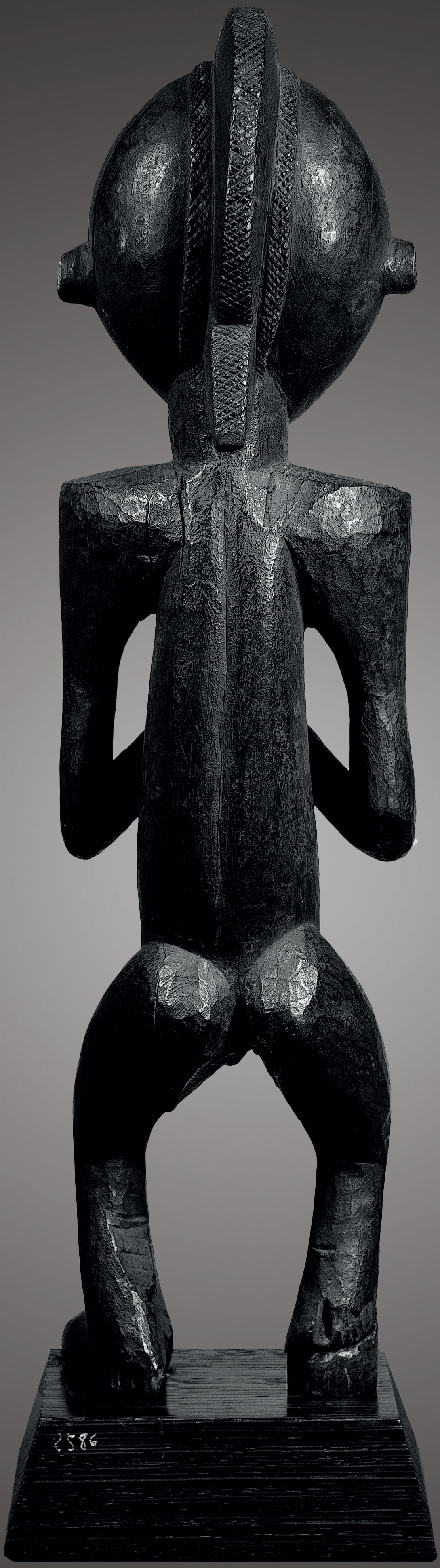

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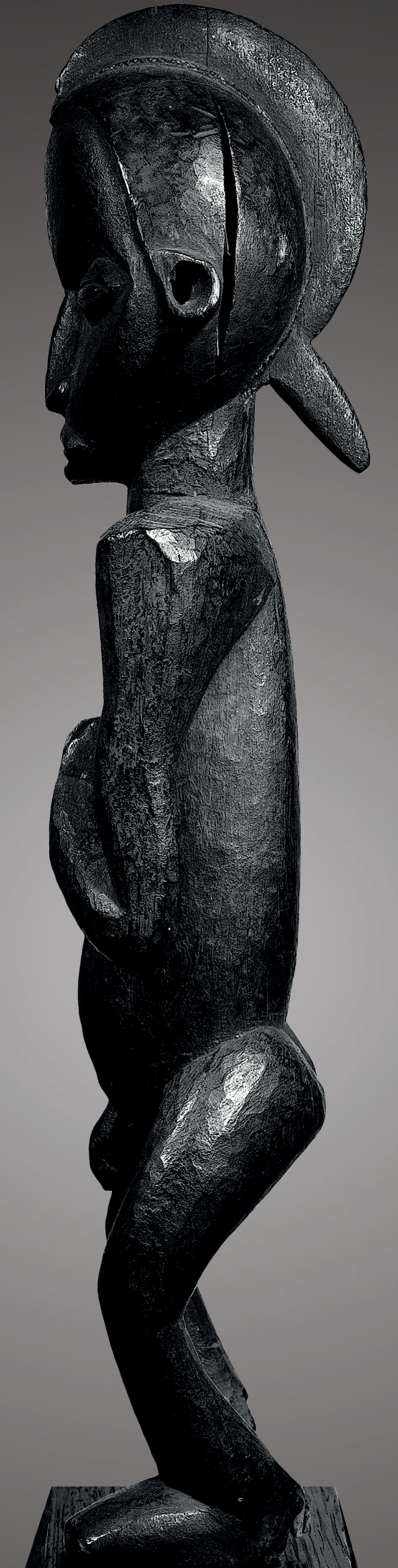

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GUARDIAN FIGURE

Kota, Gabon

19th century

Wood, brass, copper and iron

37 cm

PROVENANCE

Charles Ratton, Paris

Alessandro von Hoerselmann Collection, Milano, 1952

Este Milani Collection, Busto Arsizio, 1953

Yann Ferrandin, Paris

Private Collection, Milano

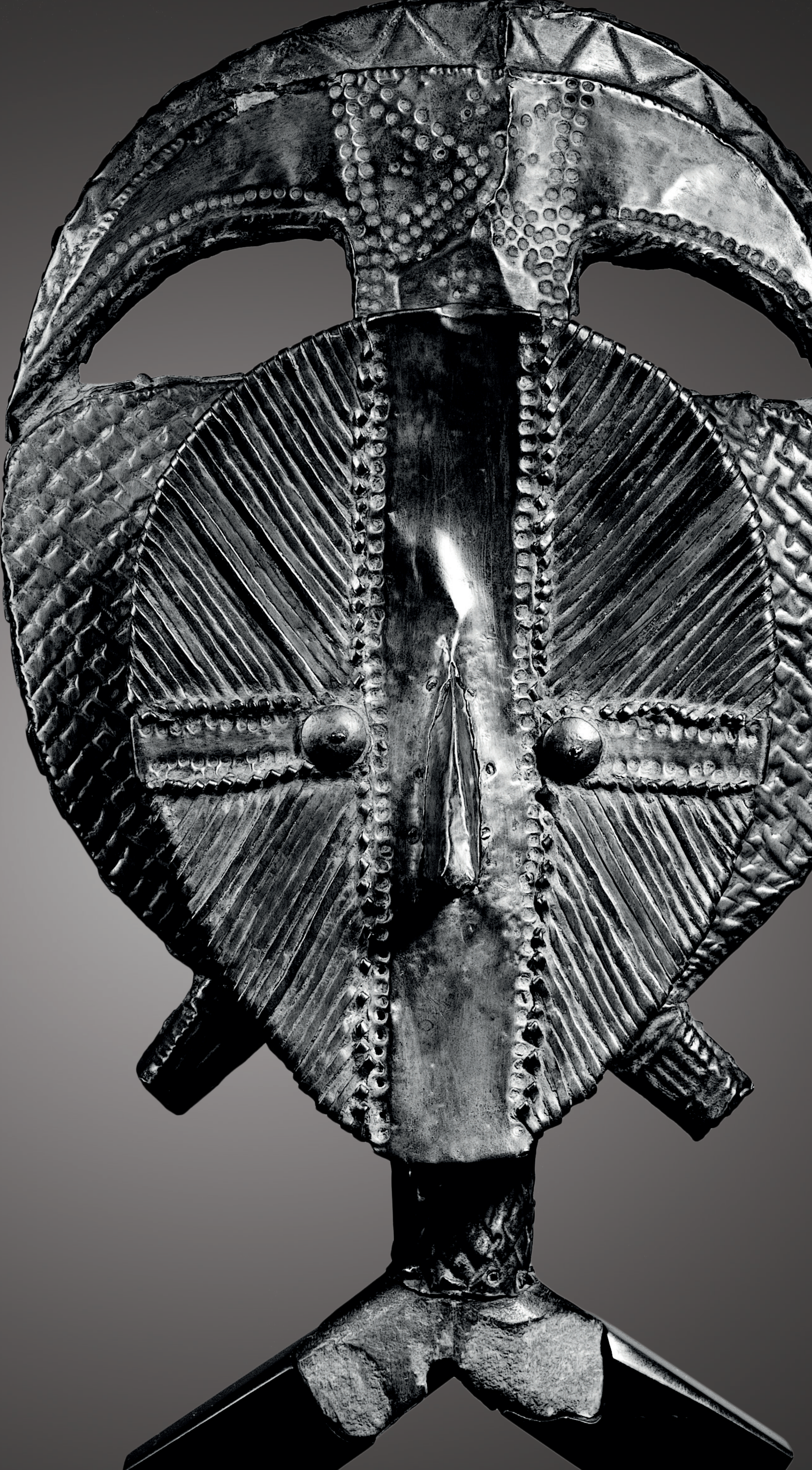
EXHIBITIONS

Arte Negra, Galleria Il Collezionista, Milano, 1953

Exhibition curated by Charles Ratton

PUBLICATIONS

Carlo Ragghianti, Sele Arte n.4, Lucca, 1953, p. 3



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The widespread admiration and the favor among collectors, which make the Bakota Guardian Figures true icons of African Art, have their roots in the sense of inner mysterious energy they emanate.

This is the reason why these Figures immediately impressed the European Artistic Avant-Garde in its search of a way to provoke an emotional, nonrational approach to art, far beyond the exterior material appearance.

The present Guardian Figure belongs to a small group of survived examples known for their antiquity and for the accuracy of making.

Related to the works of the Northern Obamba and Shamaye, the style shown here had its center in the region of Franceville.

The skillfulness of the atelier where this figure was crafted, is confirmed by the simultaneous presence of all the techniques known and applied by Kota artists, that is to say, engraving (on the crescent and ‘ears’) and the use of stripes of various metals to cover and give vibrancy to the ‘face’.

As it is known, no interpretation gathered on the field exists about the meanings of the engraved geometric patterns and about the reason for the structure of the ‘face’ (the ancestors’ cult to which they were connected declined in the second half of the XIX century), but it is reasonable to assume that, far beyond to be mere decoration, the disposition of the metal stripes on the ‘face’ was clearly aimed at driving the attention to the eyes, the true conceptual center of the sculpture.

It is from the eyes that the sacred power embodied by the Guardian Figure emanates and at the same time their fixity reminds the perennial authoritative presence of the ancestors.

The overall abstract composition which underlines the eyes denies any human appearance to the sculpture and affirms through the rigor of its geometry its metaphysical nature.

The perfection of the architecture and the perfectly balanced proportions confirm this Bakota Guardian Figure as one of the best-known examples of this style.

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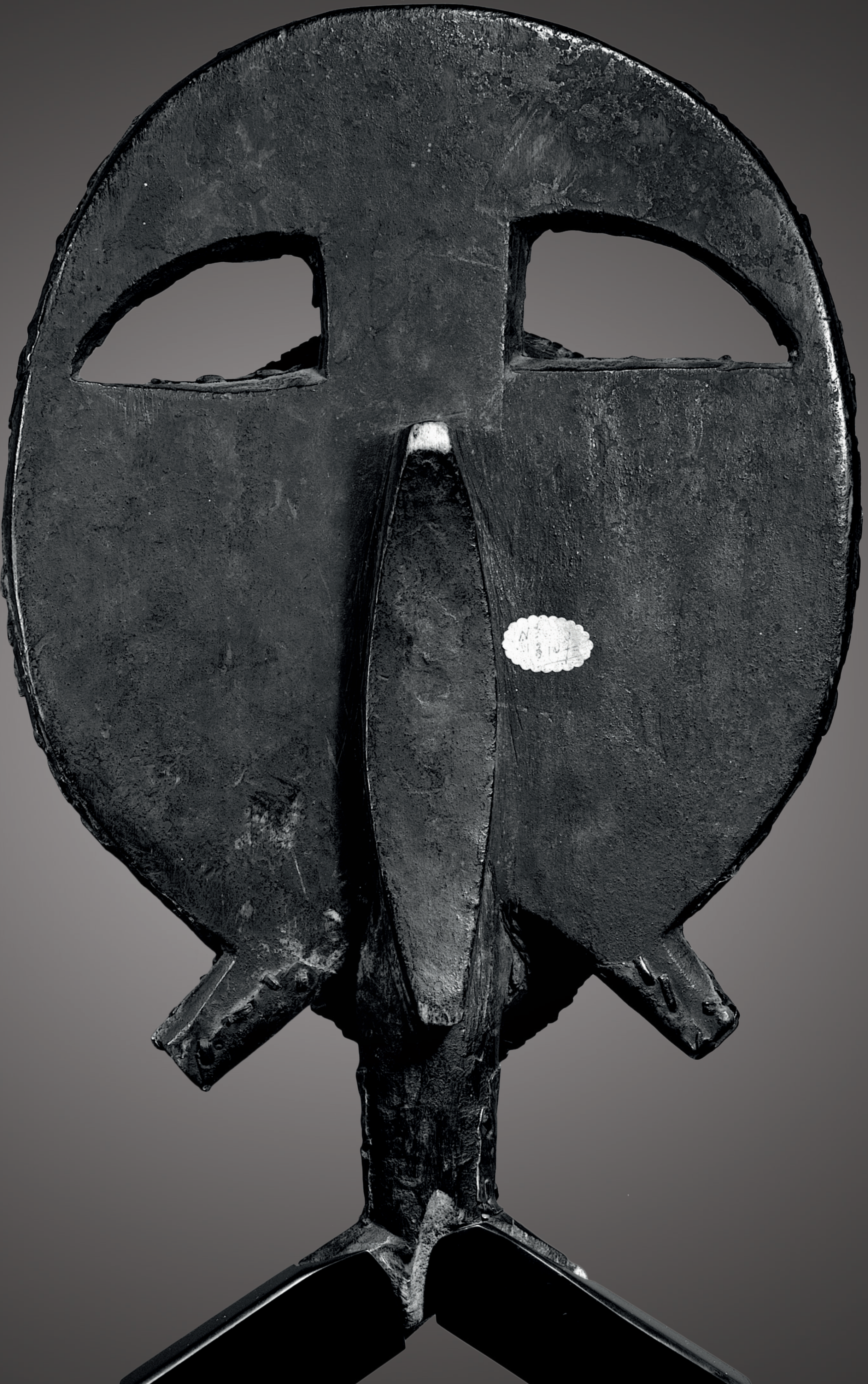

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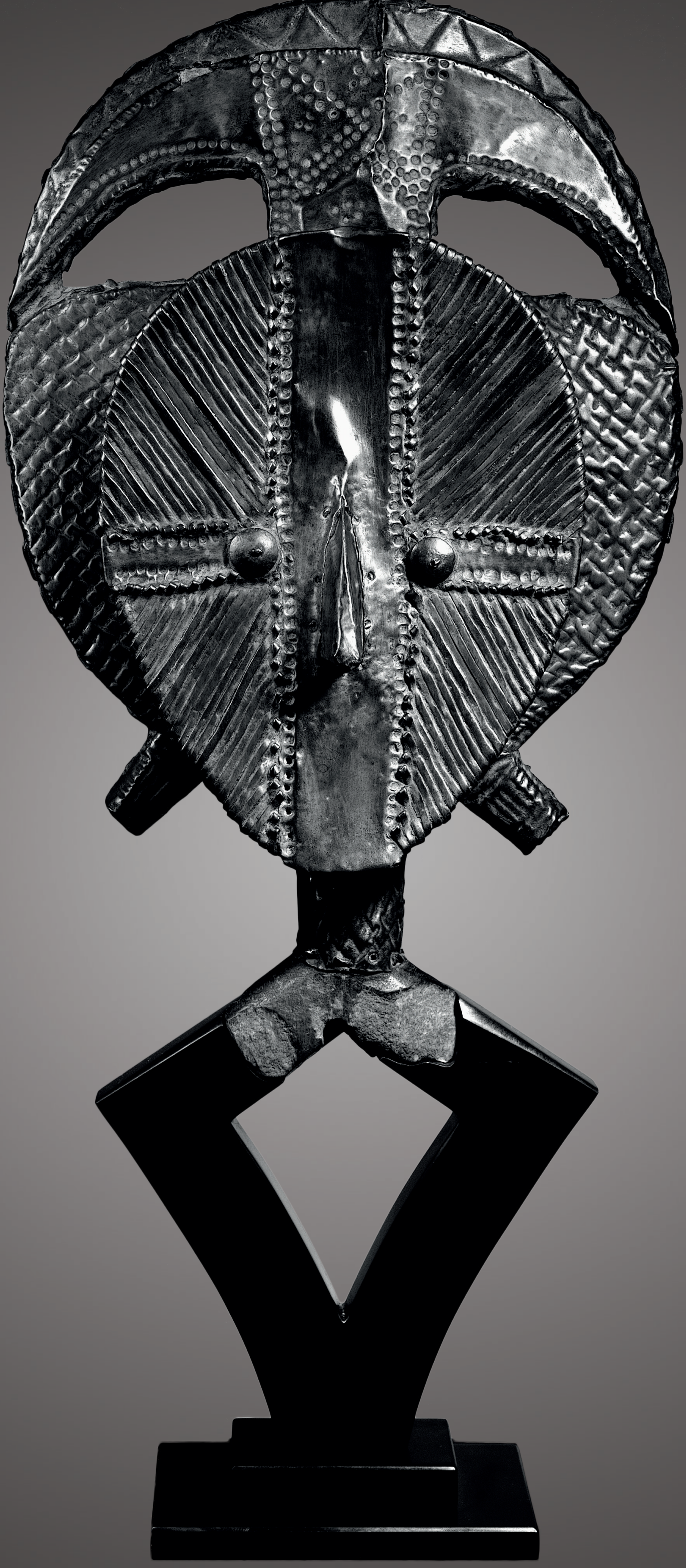

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HEADDRESS

Boki, Nigeria

Late 19th - Early 20th century

Wood, iron, fabric

32,5 cm

PROVENANCE

Michael Oliver, New York

Pace Gallery, New York

Private Collection, New York

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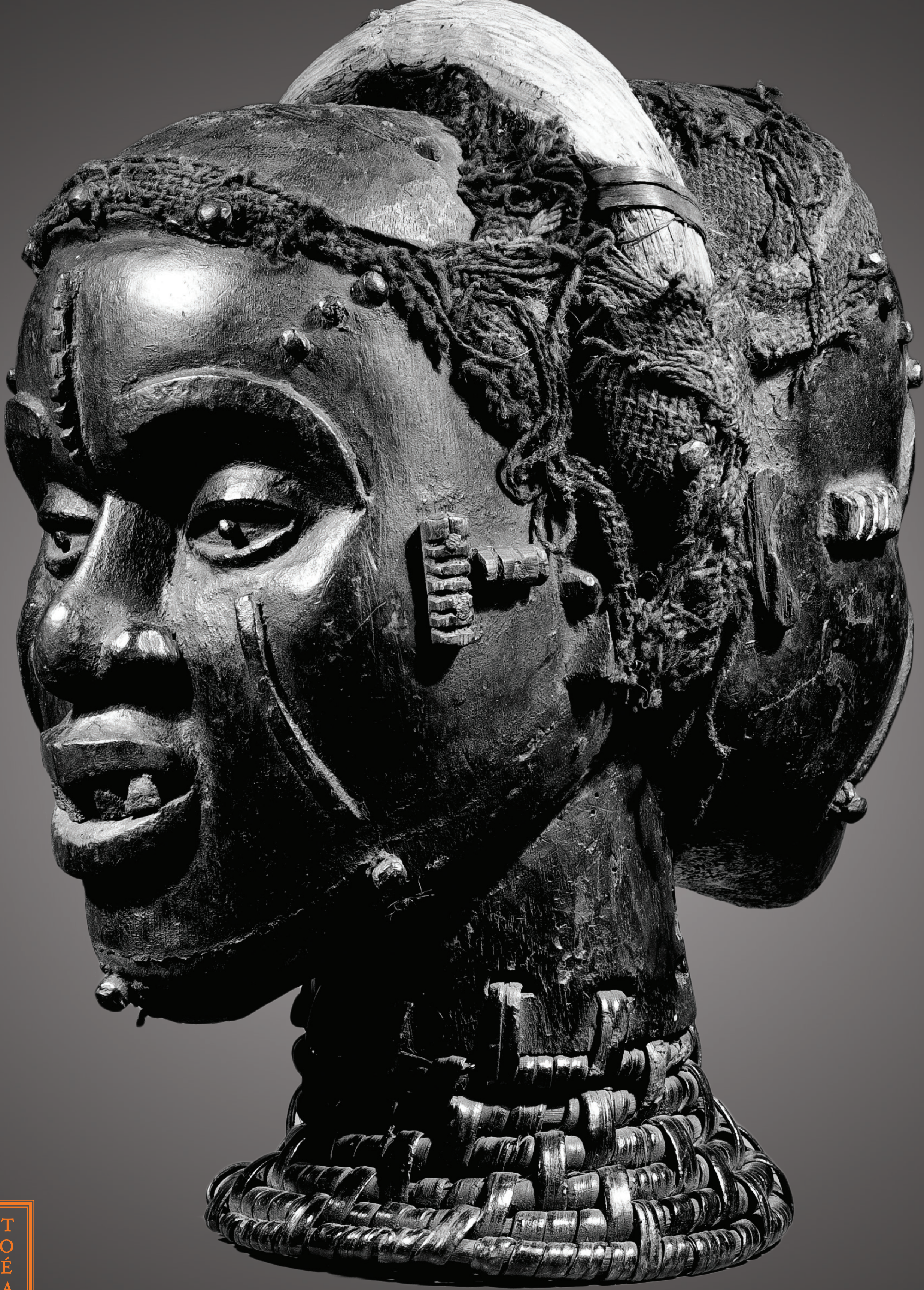
At their best, the Ejagham-Boki headdresses coming from the middle Cross River region must be regarded as one of the marvels of sub-Saharan African realism.

The Nigerian artists were able to express through these sculptures, which served as icons for funeral societies and age sets, a wide repertory of human types and attitudes thanks to aesthetic languages which go from refined to brutal.

In this example, certainly made in one of the most vigorous schools of naturalistic masks, the author’s attention was pointed, more than to the exuberance of dimensions or the violence of the traits, to the vitality and energy expressed by the chromatic contrast between the black of the face and the vivid red of the eyes.

These red accents reflect the association with blood, vitality and essential transition such as that from mortal adults to ancestors.

The care in which the scarifications are represented, the complexity of the hairstyle, the life-size dimension of the face and its vivid expression, make this sculpture a true refined portrait.



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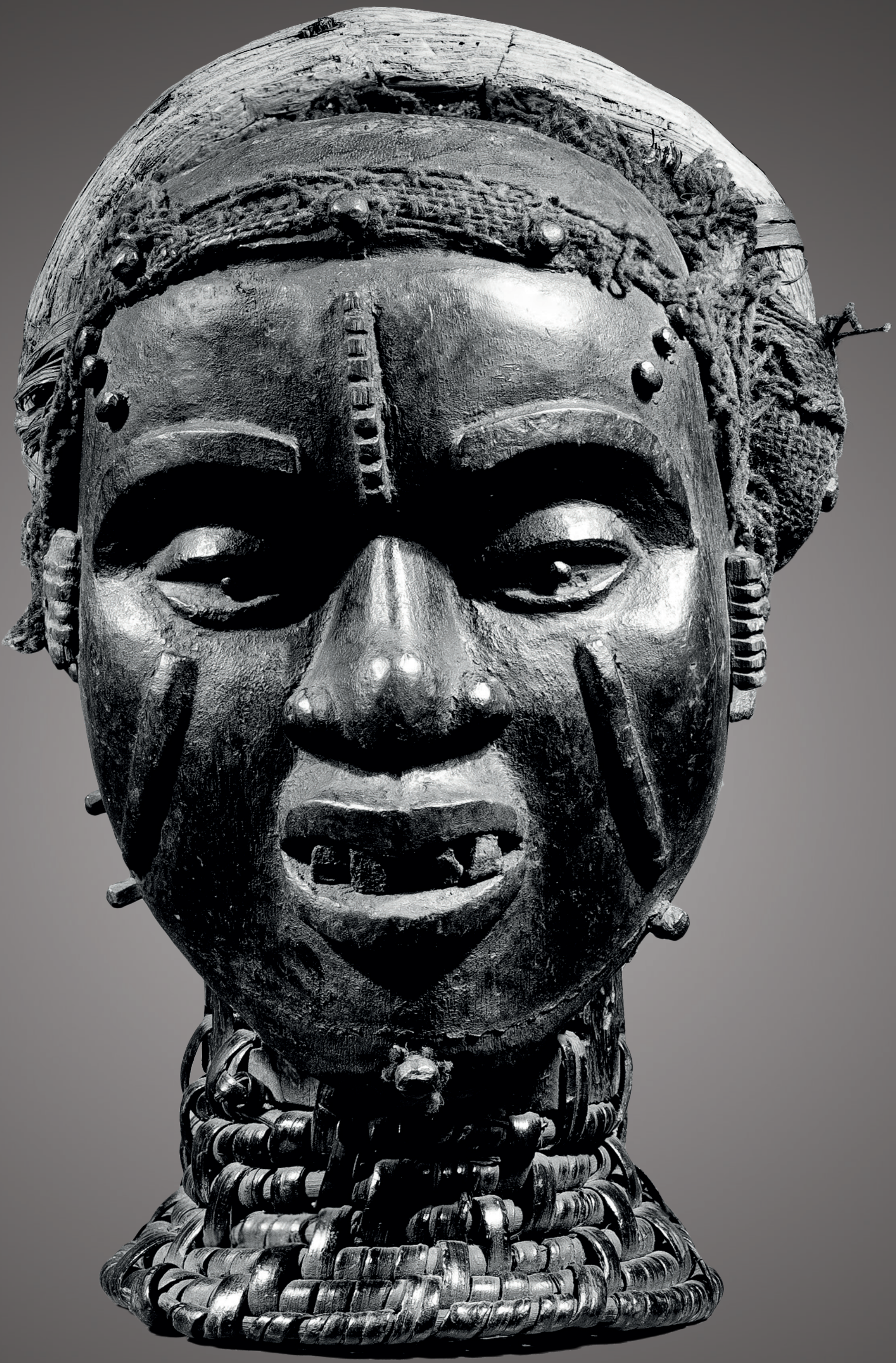

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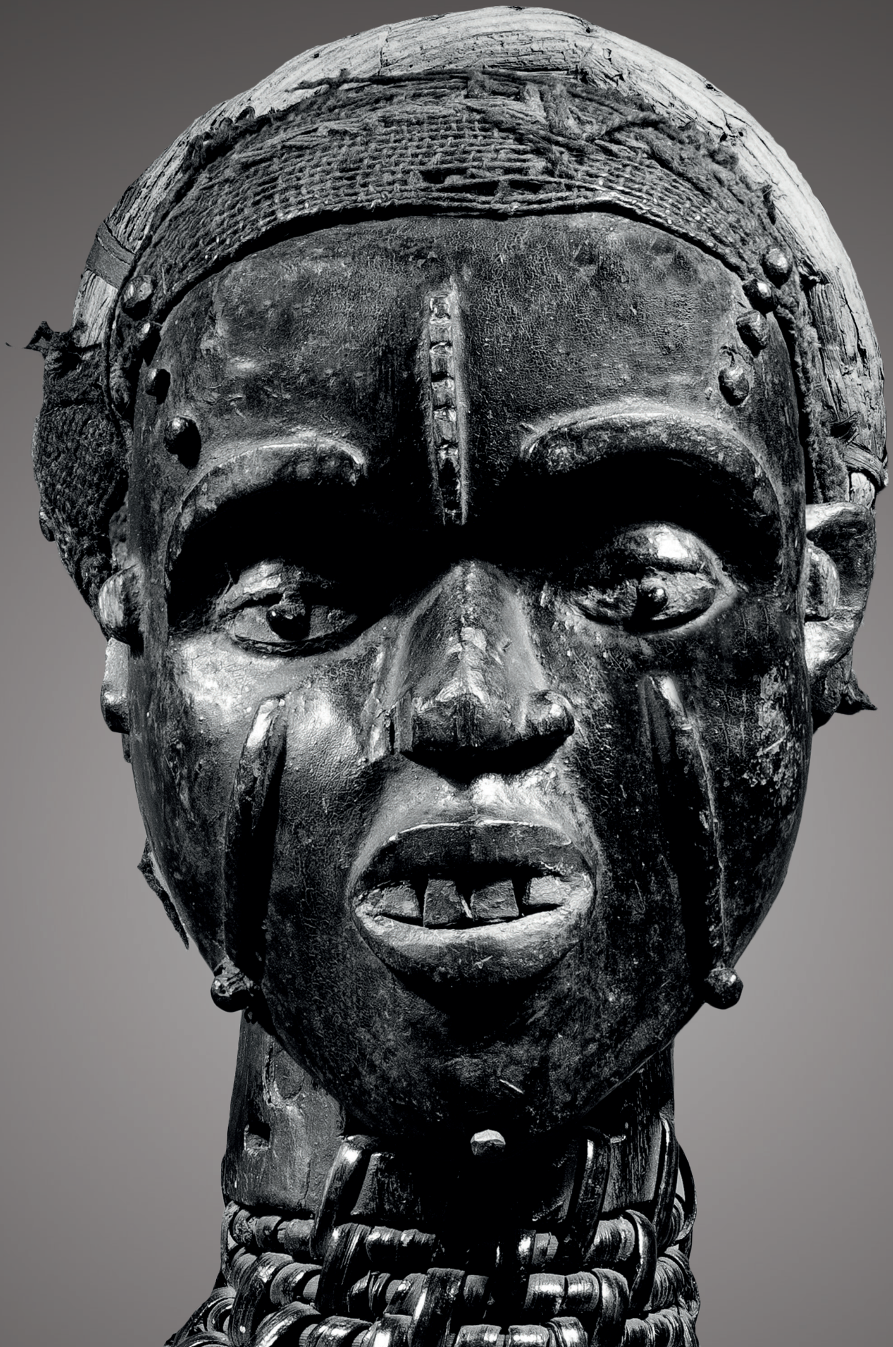

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PORTRAIT MASK

Baule, Ivory Coast

19th century

Wood, kaolin

29 cm

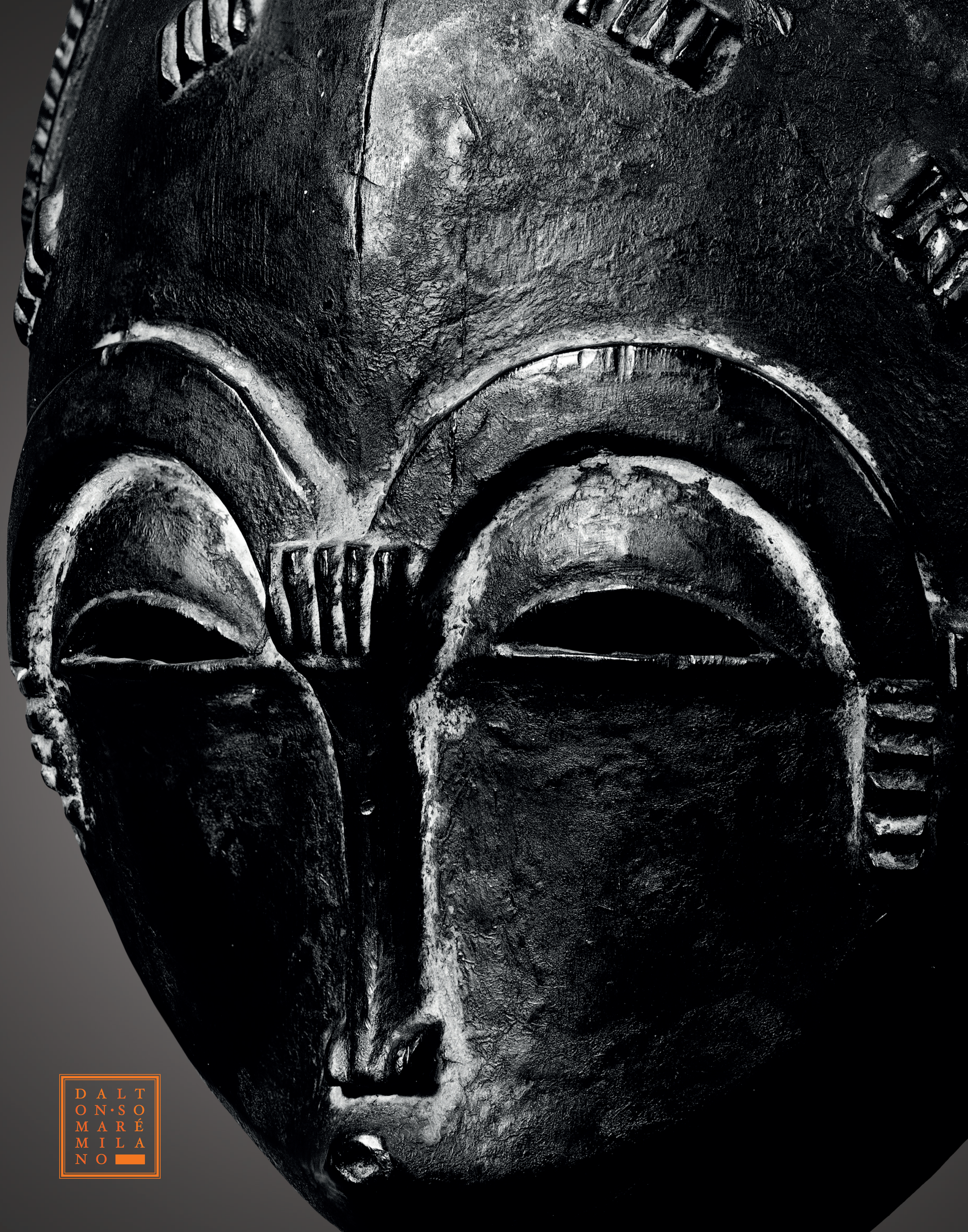
PROVENANCE

John J. Klejman, New York

Dick Clark Collection, Los Angeles

Guilhem Montagut, Barcelona

Private Collection, Paris



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The Art of the Baule must be regarded as a classical one in the proper sense of the word.

Its classicism, expression of a hierarchic society where ethic values and ideals were celebrated by professional, noted artists, can be perceived through the harmony of proportions, the search to express moral order through beauty, and finally, even via the soft levigated cleanness of the surfaces which concours to let the images appear as a representation of mythical, idealised beings.

From the morphological point of view, the Baule works of Art are characterised by a perfectly static axiality (interrupted only by minor intentional asymmetries), from a great refinement of carvings and attention to details and, in the statues, from a marked descending perspective.

The main contribution that the Baule sculptors gave to African Art (and therefore to the Art of the 20th century) certainly lies though in the construction of the faces, whose architecture has become a true symbol of Primitivism.

The eyes, surmounted by gull-wing eyebrows, are slits set close together.

The nose is basically reduced to a graphic sign that cuts the plane of the face along its entire length.

The mouth, small and rounded, is immobile and inexpressive.

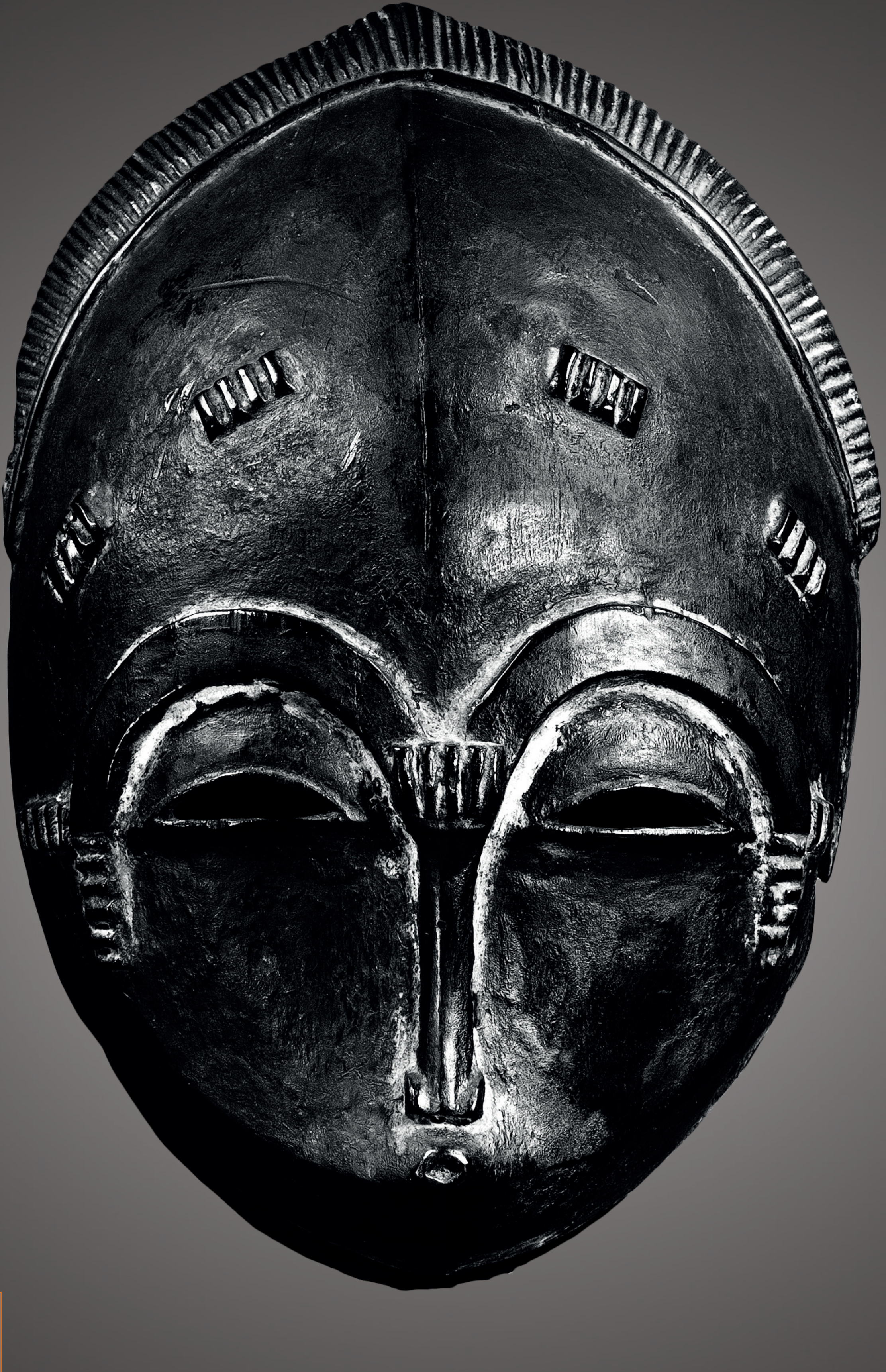
All these fundamental aesthetic canons can be seen at their apex in this archaic, archetypical mask which stands out from the large corpus of Baule masks exactly for the convincing balance between its formal perfection and its authoritative and mysterious presence.

All the details that make up the face are arranged according to a perfect geometry.

The marks of scarifications enhance the wide surface of the noble forehead surrounded at the top by the neat line of the hair and bounded in the lower part by the setting of the eyebrows.

Three cosmetic scars conclude the eyebrows and define the line of the eyes which are hollow but intensely expressive.

Overall, this almost abstract mask, of deep human dignity at the same time, must be regarded as the work of a master of great creativity and sensibility.



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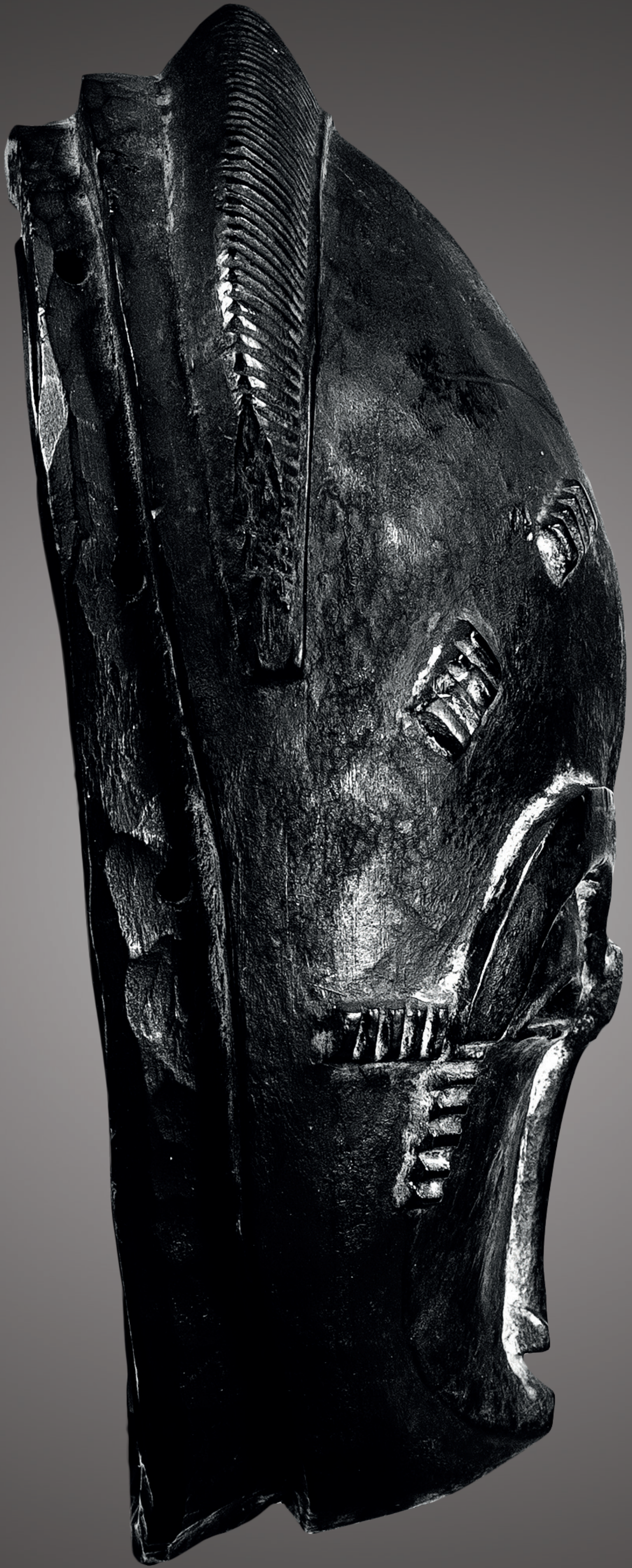

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HEADDRESS

Bamana, Mali

Late 19th century

Wood

57 cm

PROVENANCE

Lucas Ratton, Paris

Private Collection, Paris

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The *Kono* Society masks are well known for the geometry of their shapes that the crusty sacrificial patina, which always covers their surface, cannot hide.

The construction of complex forms, both masks and statues, joining in a creative way elementary solids like prisms, cones, half spheres, etc. is the key to the aesthetic language of the Bamana people.

The astonishing modernity of the result explains the reason for its favor among art collectors.

In this mask, the almost constructivist language is driven to its extreme consequences.

Just two pure solids, a half sphere and a prism, are magically joined together to create a zoomorphic head whose enormous snout recalls ferocious beasts.

A brilliant artistic invention able to make present the mystery of the natural world and at the same time an absolutely contemporary work of art that proves Primitive Art and the Art of the 21st century speak the same language.

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MASK

Ibibio, Nigeria

Late 19th cent.

Wood, fiber, pigments

25,5 cm

PROVENANCE

Peter Mactaggart, Welwyn, UK

Pierre Dartevelle, Bruxelles

Bernard De Grunne, Bruxelles

Private Collection, Bruxelles

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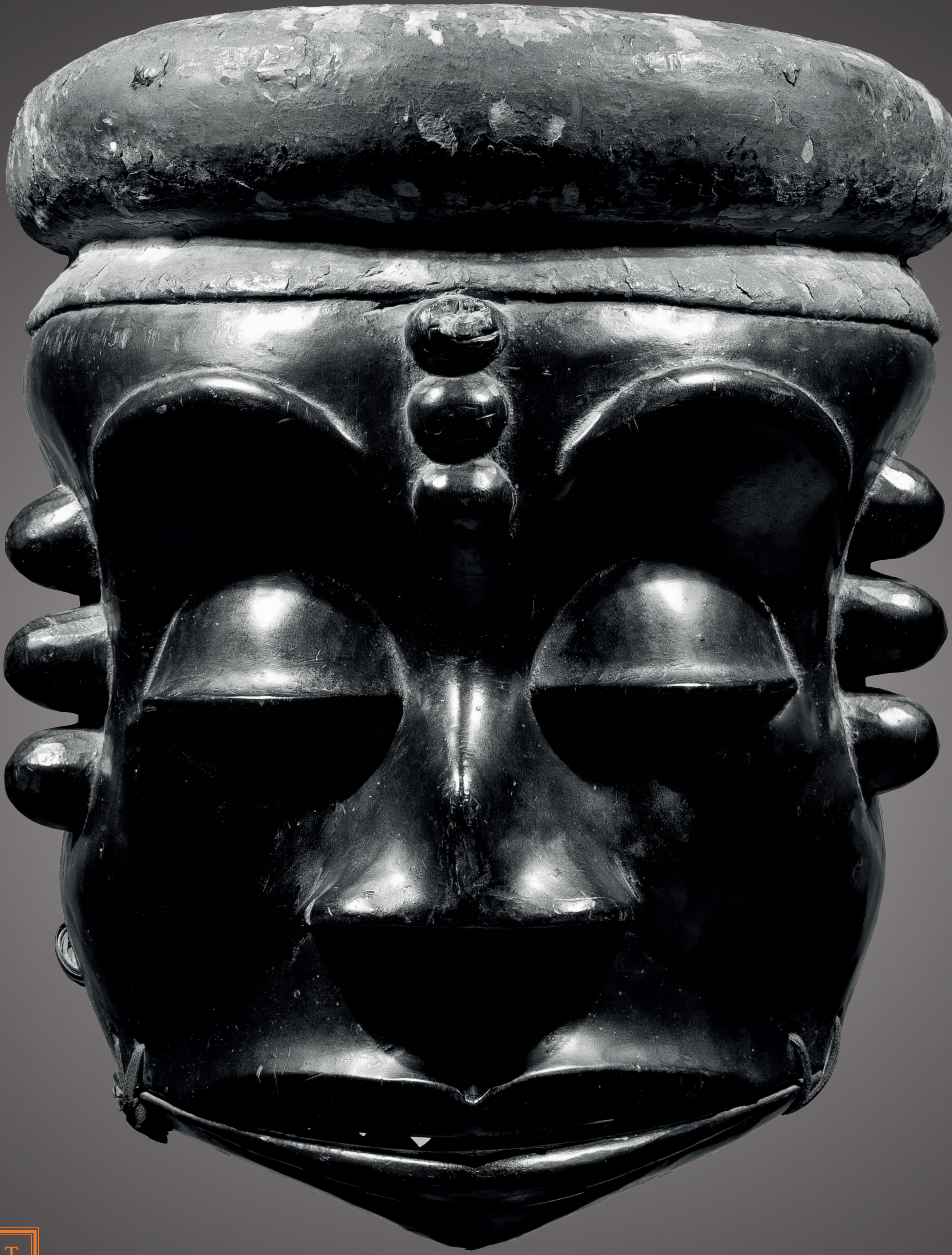
This *Ekpo* Society mask, with a movable lower jaw, was reserved for high dignitaries.

Its plastic exuberance is justified by the recurring idea in the symbolism of African art, namely that of visualizing the right and aptitude to rule through the emphasis of the sensory abilities.

This symbolic-dimensional element, that sometimes goes as far as the caricature and the grotesque, is in this magnificent mask mitigated by the elegance of the carving and the soft flow of the volumes.

Undoubtedly intended to represent and express power, this rare mask (few examples are known) manages, also thanks to the splendid black and glossy patina, to restrain aggressivity and attenuate it with the inner expression of the semi-closed eyelids.



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MALE FIGURE

Baule, Ivory Coast

Late 19th century - early 20th cent.

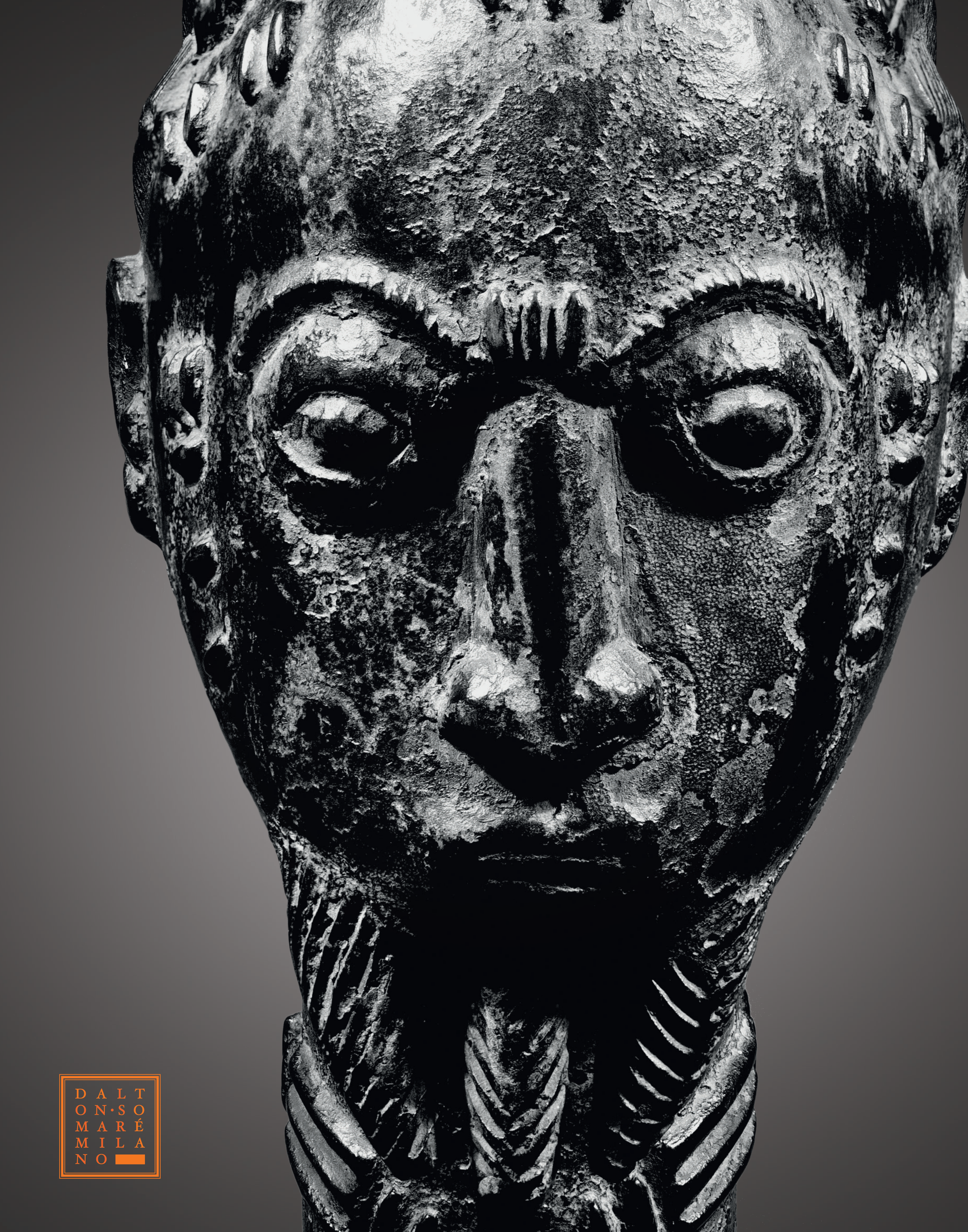
Wood

63 cm

PROVENANCE

Philippe Ratton, Paris

Private Collection, Paris



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Despite their monumental and hieratic presence, the seated Baule figures were never intended as ancestral effigies.

They were made to satisfy two cultural instances: one related to the Baule belief of the existence of a metaphysical world where everyone has another partner and known as *blolo bla* or *blolo bian* (wife or husband in the other world) and another one connected with the cult of the *asie usu*, the spirits of the bush, secondary divinities whose favor was gained by a diviner paying a sacrifice/ tribute to the figures.

Impressive figures like the present one could be made for trance diviners who kept them in their private shrine room.

Clients who came to consult the oracle privately had to sit in the small and quite dim room facing figures like this though they could neither look at them too closely nor talk about the sculpture.

It can be said that the presence of impressive and unusual sculptures of this kind enhanced the reputation and the carisma of the diviner.

Undoubtedly the models for this kind of figures were elder members of the community considered examples of traditional ethical values.

As in the early works the head is massive and oversized in accordance with the Baule canons.

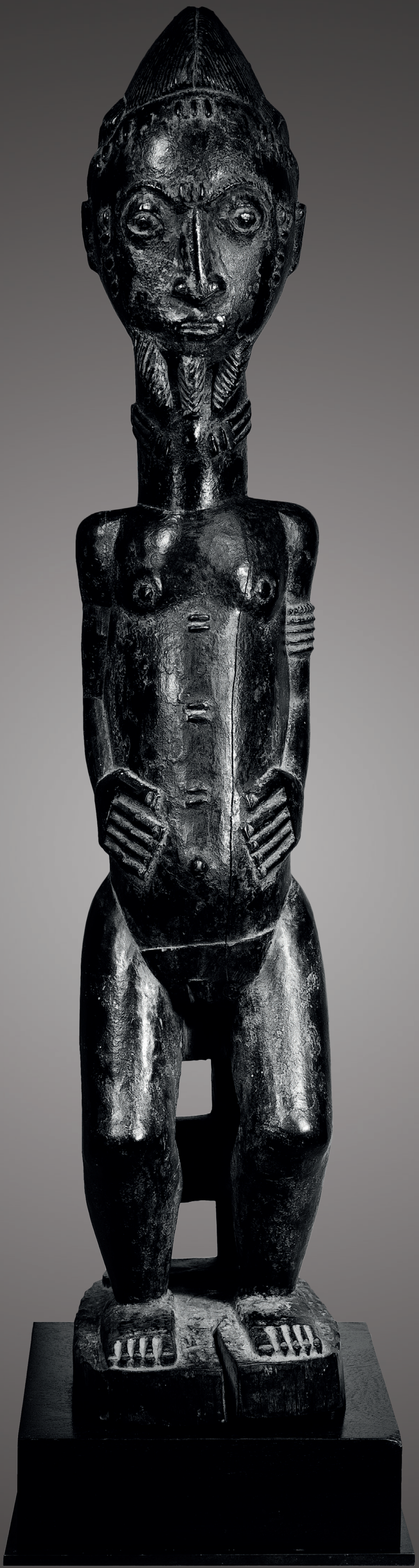
The position of the bust, arms and legs, marked by a strong descendent prospective, is intended to transmit to the observer an impression of dignity and power.

The attention paid to details such as hairdo , beard and scarifications gives to the figure elegance and aristocratic appeal which testify the high social status and the moral order of the man portrayed.

The look of the eyes is straight and energetic and expresses authority which confines with severity.

The smooth and thick black patina speaks about the devotional care deserved to this sculpture and confirms its great age.

DALTON·SOMARÉ MILANO



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FEMALE FIGURE

Dogon, Mali

19th century

Wood

53,5 cm

PROVENANCE

John J. Klejman, New York

Mozes S. Schulz Collection, USA

Private Collection, Los Angeles

Private Collection, Bruxelles

Pace Primitive, New York

Private Collection, Bruxelles

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This sculpture of incredible modernity breaks all the canons and the stylistic conventions and at the same time manages to respect the recurring themes in the Dogon's traditional iconography.

A work of art that reveals the genius of an artist aware of the tradition but who moves freely within its limits and breaks them.

The body of the female figure represented is completely broken down and rearranged according to the intellectual process reminiscent of Picasso's synthetic cubism.

The anatomy is completely overwhelmed and the forms have become pure abstract volumes.

Geometric lines, which vaguely recall scarifications, underline the absolutely non-naturalistic choice adopted by the artist.

The simultaneous coexistence of two movements in the figure is an extraordinary invention.

The arms are doubled: two, which end with fan-shaped hands, are raised to the sky while the other two, which start from the same elbow, support the object that the figure holds in front of the abdomen.

To keep the inner coherence of this choice the carver is pushed to apply to the feet the same process of abstraction imposed on the raised arms.

The feet, flattened and incorporated into the base, also assume the shape of a fan, while surrealistically retaining the correct number of toes.

Just another figure, female too, with the same cultural and stylistic imprinting is known.

The existence of a so limited corpus of works adds, to the plastic charm of this masterpiece, the appeal of its absolute rarity.

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PHOTOS

Gerolamo Vigorelli

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